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Family story functions and roles: A comparsion of three families of different ethnicities

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FAMILY STORY FUNCTIONS AND ROLES: A COMPARISON OF THREE FAMILIES OF DIFFERENT ETHNICITIES

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FAMILY STORY FUNCTIONS AND ROLES: A COMPARISON OF THREE FAMILIES OF DIFFERENT ETHNICITIES

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University of Nebraska, 1998

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Family storytelling has been a topic given increased attention recently, although research comparing family stories among different ethnicities is limited. This study investigated the differences in the family story experience among three families of different ethnicities: Caucasian, African-American and Hispanic. The research focused primarily on family members' perceptions of family story functions and roles and how these families differed in those perceptions. The findings are discussed, and the families' experiences are examined in terms of ethnicity.

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First and foremost, I thank my family, without whom I would not have my own family stories. To my parents, thank you for your unconditional love and support. To my four sisters and two brothers, thank you for all the experiences that make up our family stories. To my grandparents, thank you for your example and for believing in me.

I thank my thesis committee for their time and effort on my behalf. Thank you to Hollis Glaser for motivating me to delve into my research and for guiding me through the difficult parts. I also thank the three families that welcomed me into their homes and shared their stories with me.

I dedicate this thesis to my late grandmother, Leora Thurman. May her love of family always be with me.

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Chapter One: Introduction

"Storytelling in ordinary talk between intimates is one of the most common enactments of narrative discourse" (Blum-Kulka, 1993, p. 361).

I remember that night as if it were yesterday. After a long day at my younger sister's academic competition in a town about 200 miles from home, we were heading east, a long trip in the dark ahead of us. I don't remember how we got on the subject, but soon my mother began telling my sisters and me family stories, stories about when she was a little girl growing up in Idaho and Washington. The time sped by as we went back in time with my mother to her life as a young child, her interactions with her big brothers and sister, going to the movies on Saturday afternoons, the antics of her brother Gary, the family clown, and the time she got to be on a kids' TV show with her little brother. The storytelling continued for a good part of the trip as my mother moved on to stories about my six siblings and me.

Although I did not realize it then, that night I began to understand the importance of family stories. "Mommy, tell us a story about when you were a little girl," has been a common request in my family. We tell family stories often — at the dinner table, on family vacations, and at bedtime. My family even has a tradition on birthdays of reading the funny, happy, and sad stories from the birthday child's baby book. But I think that particular night really stands out because I had recently embarked on my own "adult life"

by graduating from college, getting my first real job, and establishing my own home. Family stories were becoming a link to my family of origin and to my ancestors, giving me a sense of belonging to something so much more significant, so much larger than my life alone.

I entered this research with the desire to discover the function of family storytelling — why do families tell stories? Initially, I intended to look at stories of any kind (i.e., religious stories, legends, myths, jokes, family stories). As I became more engrossed in this research, my question changed to wanting to understand the functions of *family* stories. My purpose is to fill an apparent gap in the research and to look at family stories from a more functional paradigm — why they are told and what differences in functions exist among families of different ethnicities.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Family narratives, and their relationship to family communication, have received an increased amount of attention during the past two decades. As one scholar has stated, the importance of family narratives is that the "family narrative is a part of one's heritage, one's communication baggage. The family story which unites the family's history and its present is also a link to future generations" (Wolff, 1993, p.13). Researchers have looked at family narratives in many different ways: as rituals (Blum-Kulka, 1993), as a method to study rituals (King, 1995), as a method to study single mothers (Whitchurch, 1997), as political activity (Ochs & Taylor, 1992), as socialization strategies (Blum-Kulka, 1993; Miller, Potts, Fung, Hoogstra, & Mintz, 1990; and Stone, 1988), as therapeutic tools (Williams, 1995), as a means to study the divorce experience (Riessman, 1991), and as an intergenerational means of passing down family history (Kandell, 1996; Martin, Hagestad & Diedrick, 1988). Apparently, there is no shortage of family stories as "families everywhere have their stories, many of them entertaining, all of them meaningful, pertinent, and binding" (Stone, 1988, p. 11).

Family stories are more likely to be told during particular events or occasions, including dinner (Blum-Kulka, 1993; Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992; Ochs & Taylor, 1992), outings, Christmas, weddings, funerals, visiting relatives, family gatherings (Byng-Hall & Thompson, 1990; Stone, 1988), and during household chores, birthday parties and family reunions (Langellier & Peterson, 1993).

This literature review will include a definition of family stories, roles associated with family stories, gender differences in family stories, intergenerational family stories, family stories as predictors of relationship satisfaction, the content of family stories, the functions of family stories, and ethnic differences in family stories. The theoretical perspectives on narrative and relationships with the literature will be discussed at the end of the review. The term "story" and "narrative" will be used interchangeably.

Defining Family Stories

To review the literature on family stories, it is important to first have a working definition of a family story. Definitions of "family" vary greatly (Langellier & Peterson, 1993; Trost, 1990), and it is not the purpose of this study to review the literature on defining the family. "Family," in the context of family stories in this paper, will simply be defined as persons related by blood, marriage or adoption. Though simple, this definition encompasses the extended as well as the nuclear family, allowing for a broader range of subjects about whom stories are told. The definition of a family story will be a story based on a true, consequential event regarding the life and history of the family and told by family members (Benoit, 1997; Book, 1996). I am using this definition because it is clear and simple, but not restrictive; many different types of stories can fit under this definition. Though this definition requires the story be told *by* family members, it does not require the stories to be told *to* family members. The family stories to be looked at in this research may include those told outside the family. Langellier and Peterson (1993) note that family stories are often told in classrooms, courtrooms, celebrity interviews, therapists'

offices and conversations with friends. Teachers have discovered that family stories can serve teaching purposes outside the home as well. For example, Wolff (1993) has advocated requiring students to obtain one of their family's stories as an assignment. She stated that this type of assignment helps students become more interested in the class and enriches their understanding of the family. In addition, family stories have found their way into collegiate forensics competitions (Miller, 1991).

Family Story Roles

Ochs and Taylor (1992) have defined several participant roles in narrative activity. The *protagonist* is the main character in the narrative; the *elicitor* is the person who asks for the story to be told; the *initial teller* is the person who first makes a declarative proposition about a story; the *primary recipient* is the person to whom the narrative is primarily directed.

Stone (1988) sees the scapegoat as another type of role in family stories. Often a certain person in the family will emerge in family stories as the one being blamed for bad things that happened to the family.

Gender Differences

Roles

Much research has shown that men and women have different roles in family stories. Females, especially mothers, seem to maintain most of the family stories through telling them and hearing them. Females are more likely to be the tellers of the family stories (Benoit, 1997; Miller et al., 1988), and mothers have more of a tendency to

introduce family stories, by which they control the topic and the timing of the family stories (Ochs & Taylor, 1992). Mothers have been found to contribute the greatest number of stories (Loeb, 1996; Stone, 1988). "Family stories — telling them and listening to them — belong more to the women's sphere . . . the lore of family and family culture itself . . . are preserved and promulgated primarily by women" (Stone, 1988, p. 19). In order to be able to tell many of the stories, however, women must first hear them. Stone (1988) posits that women are more frequently the recipients of family stories than men. Additionally, women tend to be more familiar with stories of previous generations than men (Baldwin, 1985; Loeb, 1996).

Gender differences are not as clear-cut when one looks at the subjects of family stories. Martin et al. (1988) found that males were more often the subject of stories than were females, but Benoit (1997) found women to be just as likely to be a main character in a story as men. Martin et al. (1988) found that family stories are more likely to have male subjects in a work setting and female subjects in a family environment.

As tellers of family stories, the themes may differ between genders. Mothers often tell stories relating to the family's history or sacrifice (Baldwin, 1995; Hall & Langellier, 1988; Loeb, 1996; Stone, 1988), thus fulfilling the mother's role of "family historian" (Hall & Langellier, 1988). Men's stories may be centered on their childhood mischief (Loeb, 1996) or may be linear, dramatized, actioned family narratives (Baldwin, 1995). Nussbaum and Bettini (1994) found that grandfathers, in telling a story about "the meaning of life" were more likely than grandmothers to talk about youth experiences,

wartime experiences, major health problems, or parables. Grandmothers, however, were more likely to talk about family issues, especially courtship stories.

As young children, females may be taught to take a more interpersonal orientation than males to family storytelling. Reese (1996) found mothers tell daughters stories of their births with a more interpersonal focus than with their sons (e.g., mentioning the child in context of other people or mentioning people other than the child).

Women's Stories as a Reflection of Changing Roles

Silberstein (1988) researched courtship stories told by women and noted that women of three generations told the stories differently. The women of the oldest generation (more than 70 years of age) offered no justification for leaving college or sacrificing a career to marry. Among second-generation women (ages 50-60), courtship stories began to reflect the conflict between college or work and marriage and family. However, the courtship stories of the third generation (ages 20-30) stressed the woman choosing a husband as an event consistent with her own education or work goals. Silberstein (1988) found that men's courtship stories did not discuss women's changing roles, suggesting that is because they have been less affected by those changes.

Mother and Daughter Storytelling Strategies and Roles

Some research has focused specifically on the strategies and roles involved when mothers and daughters tell family narratives. Hall and Langellier (1988) described ten different strategies that mothers and daughters use in family storytelling. Hall and Langellier state that the mothers fill their role as historian while the daughters complement

that role, listening to the stories and acknowledging the story, its meaning and significance. This role of the daughter complements and confirms the mother's function as family historian. In addition, the daughter can also take the role of a family storyteller, under her mother's guidance, and can take the role of a challenger to her mother's family stories.

Family Stories and Fathering

Family stories told by fathers can also be used in family life education to encourage and understand good fathering. Dollahite, Hawkins and Brotherson (1996) suggest that encouraging fathers to share stories with other fathers about their children can help with four dimensions of change necessary to become better fathers — cognitive, affective, ethical, and behavioral. Fathers sharing stories with each other can help with cognitive change as the fathers learn from each other and can see problems from a new perspective. The strong stimulus provided by emotional interaction in stories can result in an affective dimension of change. Sharing stories with other fathers can reinforce a father's own desire to connect meaningfully with his children and provide ethical change. Finally, a story can be something a father can use as a "model" for his behavior as a father to improve.

Intergenerational Family Stories

Benoit (1997) found that when parents are the tellers of stories, most of those stories are about their children. Recipients of family stories tend to be told stories by the parent generation, such as a father, mother, aunt, as opposed to a grandparent. (Benoit,

1997). However, family stories are not limited to the nuclear family but are intertwined with intergenerational family relationships and can have an impact, especially on grandchildren (Kandell, 1996).

Martin et al. (1988) studied historical family events that are passed down from generation to generation. They found that these family stories relate more to personal events rather than historical events (i.e., a war, the Depression). In addition, they found that family stories tend to be about subjects who are not far removed from the storyteller and that younger generations tend to tell just as many or more family stories than the older generations.

Nussbaum and Bettini (1994) studied the stories that grandparents tell their grandchildren when asked to tell a story that captures the meaning of life for them. They found grandmothers to talk twice as long as grandfathers and 80% of grandparents to mention their age in the story (p. 74).

Family Stories as Predictors of Relationship Satisfaction Within Families

In the past several years, scholars have studied family stories as predictors and indicators of relationship satisfaction within families.

Predictors of Marital Quality

Family (or marital) narratives have been found to be useful as predictors of marital quality (Oppenheim, Wamboldt, Gavin, Renouf & Emde, 1996; Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha & Ortega, 1993). In a longitudinal study during the first years of marriage of both white and black couples, Veroff et al. (1993) found that the frequency of mentions of

relational affects in the stories told in the first year of marriage was positively associated with marital quality in the third year. They also found that couples who tell about their courtship in positive terms tend to have happier marriages. However, the authors surmised that the latter finding can be looked at in two different ways. The memory of a positive courtship may affect marital quality or marital quality may affect the retrospection about the courtship.

Veroff et al. (1993) also found correlations between certain themes in marriage stories and marital quality among certain subgroups of their study. When asked to tell the story of their relationship as a couple, the theme of religion correlated positively to marital quality among black wives, while the themes of finances and children correlated negatively with marital quality among black husbands.

Oppenheim et al. (1996) asked married couples to tell a personal, emotion-based story of the birth experience of their child. As expected, the researchers found emotional coherence (the couple's ability to construct a coherent, personal story full of emotion) in couples' stories to be positively related to their marital satisfaction at the time of the story telling and one and two years later.

Indicator of Relationship Satisfaction Within Families

Family stories may also indicate how people feel about their relationships with their families. Vangelisti and Crumley (1997) found that people who told family stories with positive themes such as care, togetherness, adaptability, reconstruction and humor were more likely to be satisfied in their family relationships than those people who told

family stories with negative themes such as disregard, hostility, chaos, divergent values and personality attributes.

Indicator of Parent-Child Relationship

Sherman (1990) studied the relationship between stories parents tell about their own childhoods and their relationships with their 24- to 26-month-old children. Sherman found that parents who were unable to recall any stories told about themselves as children had impaired relationships with their children. Among those who did remember stories, Sherman noted parallel emotional themes between these stories and the child's development. For example, a father who told a story about his childhood that had a theme of rebellion had a child who was showing similar behavior.

Family Story Content

Themes

Benoit's (1997) study delineates five major themes in family stories. The first theme is **injury/illness**, which might include a story about a son in a family breaking his leg when sledding. The second theme is **family traits**, stories illustrating the importance the family places on a particular trait. "A story about the baptisms of the two children in the family affirm the religious values" (p. 10), and a story about parents taking "teenagers to Appalachia during the summer to do community service indicates that the family believes in the importance of generosity and caring" (p. 10). A third theme is **survival**, pitting "the protagonist against an obstacle in nature or circumstance" (p.10). Stories of farm life before electricity are good examples of this theme. The fourth theme is **famous**

people/illustrious ancestors, including stories about a family member meeting a famous person or stories about ancestors who had interesting experiences. The last theme Benoit found is **family place**. Benoit explains that "the theme of place in the family . . . captures the essence of stories about how a particular family member is regarded within the structure of the family" (p. 10). A story about the "family villain" or a middle child with an imaginary friend would fit in this thematic category. Benoit found injury/illness stories and family trait stories to be the themes of the majority of family stories.

Byers (1997) proposes a different set of themes in family stories. The first, **traumatic events**, seems similar to Benoit's survival and illness/injury themes. The second and third themes are **good deeds** and **birth**. A fourth theme, **coupling**, includes stories that deal with meeting and turning points. **Roles** and **vacations** are the final two themes Byers found.

Stone's (1988) work has also identified themes of family stories, some of which will be discussed in this section. These themes include: love, marriage and lineage, anger and violence, illness and injury, suicide, going against the grain, illustrious ancestors, getting even, survival, fairy godmothers and patron saints, legacies, and money.

Stone (1988) investigated family stories with the themes of love, marriage and lineage. Sub-themes that emerged in this research include: (1) money is more important than love for marriage; (2) beware of passionate love; (3) don't let any outsiders in (i.e., only marry an immigrant or an orphan); (4) it's better not to marry at all; and (5) love at first sight. Other family stories often tell of illustrious ancestors — an important person in

history or a doctor who helped many people. Immigrants may tell these types of stories to make up for not feeling sufficiently welcome in the American culture (Stone, 1988). Family stories about survival can include stories about actual physical survival or "achieving and maintaining dignity, psychological comfort, or inconspicuousness" (Stone, 1988, p. 136). Some family stories may transmit survival by wits, by assimilation, by physical fitness, or by courage. Stories about money include themes of lost fortunes, having a lot of money, and not having enough money (Stone, 1988).

Some researchers, however, are cautious about focusing *only* on the content of the stories because they think that the perceptions about the stories are more important than the content (Stone, 1988) or because they recognize that a story is not necessarily an account of what happened, but what the speakers believe is appropriate to tell (Silberstein, 1988).

Repeated Stories

Benoit (1997) found family stories to be significantly more likely to be repeated than not. She stated that "even though some of these events were not originally part of the family's direct experience (i.e., the events occurred before these family members were born), they have become part of the shared repertoire of family stories" (p. 10). Family stories that have been repeated are often called "family legends" (Byng-Hall & Thompson, 1990). Benoit (1997) also found that repeated stories are more likely to be told than stories told for the first time. She suggested that the content of the story is evidently not of primary importance, since the recipients often already know the content

and suggested that this provides some indirect support for family stories as fulfilling other functions.

Family Story Functions

Stone (1988) posits that family members have a shared sense of meaning about their family stories. "That collective understanding is exactly what allows these stories to serve purposes other than entertainment" (p. 10).

Various researchers have proposed different functions of family stories. Byng-Hall and Thompson (1990) state that the primary function of family stories is that of a parent or grandparent wanting to pass a piece of information on to his or her descendants. Byers (1997) found family stories to have four primary functions: (1) to know who the family is and what they value; (2) to maintain the family; (3) to laugh; and (4) to remember the past. Stone (1988) delineates three major functions of family stories: (1) persuading family members they are special, (2) teaching about the ways of the world and the family's methods of coping with troubles and successes, and (3) helping a person know his own identity. Langellier and Peterson (1993) have looked at family stories as functioning not as artifacts or texts, but functioning as a strategy of social control. They state:

> Family storytelling involves much more than recalling and recounting anecdotes about ancestors and offspring . . . Rather, family storytelling describes a multi leveled strategic process constrained by social and historical conditions, oriented by a variety of narrative means and structures, framed by the interactional

> dynamics of telling and audiencing, and punctuated by particular choices and actions. (p. 73)

Within a family, personal narratives may also function as a way to present oneself to other family members. Shaw (1997) studied the relationship between personal narrative and self-concept. She concludes that not only do stories tell us who we are, they tell others who we are. Though Shaw did not specifically study the telling of personal narratives within families, it seems reasonable that personal narratives may be used to tell other family members who we are. For example, a father may tell his daughter a story about when he was a boy to help his daughter to understand him better.

Family Stories as Myths

Stone (1988) posits that a function of family stories is to explain *why* something happened and these types of family stories can be called myths. Stories that would be included in such a category are why an aunt was locked up in a mental institution or why a father was an alcoholic. According to Stone (1988), these myths:

> offer possible, if not always plausible, explanations for emotional cataclysms within the family and can be an adroit solution to our worries. They offer a simple, one-dimensional cause, and in so doing they seem to put a fence around the event, releasing us from our preoccupation so we can move on. (p 98)

Family Cultural Maintenance

Family stories play an important role in creating and maintaining a family culture (Byers, 1997). Byers states: "Stories adhere the family together by creating, among other

things, a shared history, a shared identity and a shared culture" (p. 117).

Peterson (1987) sees family stories functioning as strategies of family cultural maintenance. He studied pregnancy stories, stating that this time in a couple's life, the transformation from couple to parents, often is accompanied by family storytelling. Peterson analyzed pregnancy stories by comparing the family to a small group. He uses McFeat's (1974) small group communication research to describe levels of information that pertain to family cultures (and that can be seen in pregnancy stories): content-ordering, task-ordering and group-ordering.

Content-ordering involves organizing information to flow through a group. This is seen in the timing of pregnancy stories, that they are most often told when a woman's pregnancy is announced. Task-ordering concerns which generation passes the information on to other generations. In terms of pregnancy stories, the middle generation passes the information down to the younger generations, subject to correction from the older generation. This corresponds with Benoit's (1997) research that found the next oldest generation most often tells stories to a younger generation. Group-ordering refers to the creation and maintenance of identities and can be seen in pregnancy stories that tell about the event of childbirth and those that relate pregnancy to other bodily experiences.

Socialization

Family stories also can function as a powerful socialization tool. Through family stories, family members learn what is important, what rules and mores govern the family, who the members of the family are and who they should be (Stone, 1988). Stone states

that the "family is our first culture, and, like all cultures, it wants to make known its norms and mores" (p. 7). Stone continues:

> For good and for ill, (family stories) delineate the rules and the mores that govern family life, rules that succor and support as well as rules that chafe uncomfortably; rules that are out in the open as well as those that operate only by stealth. Indeed, family stories go a step further and define the family, saying not only what members should do, but who they are or should be. (p. 31)

Socialization through family stories can also be approached by looking at how children learn to tell stories. Blum-Kulka (1993) found that American families use the dinner table setting to give children a chance to practice telling stories, letting them develop their skills as well as learn what types of stories are acceptable. In addition, these conversations socialize children to local cultural rules that regulate the telling of family stories. However, children of middle-class families may have more opportunity to learn such skills as they are more likely to be exposed to adult narratives than working-class children (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992).

Another way family stories socialize family members is by what stories *don't* say. Book (1996) focused specifically on the lack of family narratives about death; although families often have a lot of stories, many families often overlook stories about death. Book discussed this in terms of silence theory — that failing to mention something teaches family members that particular topic is "taboo."

Another aspect of socialization is learning one's place or role in the family.

According to Miller et al. (1990), telling stories to another person about a child in the child's presence provides the child rich "self-relevant meanings at a number of different levels" (p. 298) which seem to play a role in the child's self-construction. Mothers may also use the story of the child's birth to help the child find his or her place in the family community (Reese, 1996).

Ethnic Differences

Little has been written on the differences among ethnically diverse families in family stories. Blum-Kulka (1993) looked at the differences between Jewish-American and Israeli family storytelling at the dinner table. She found that American families tend to focus on children as narrators, or storytellers, during dinner, encouraging them to tell about their day. Israelis, however, tend to divide the narrative activity between adults and children and allow children to participate as co-narrators in storytelling (Blum-Kulka, 1992; Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992). Benoit (1997) found in a sample of students at a midwestern university no significant difference in the frequency of family stories that are about individual experiences as compared to collective experiences. However, Israeli families have been found to be more likely than Americans to tell family stories that center around the family rather than an event that one individual experienced (Blum-Kulka, 1993; Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992).

Stone (1988) found that more than ethnicity or culture, a family's tenure and status in the United States predicted a "sunny world view" (p. 11). Eastern European Jews, Southern Europeans and African-Americans were more likely to see a world that was "less

giving, even dangerous, and where individual initiative could be, and was, undermined by chance, oppressive authority, and even the weather" (p. 11).

Theoretical Perspectives of Family Stories

Though no one theory clearly encompasses the literature on family stories, two theoretical perspectives on narrative and stories can aid in the understanding of family stories: Fisher's (1987) Narrative Theory, and Kamler's (1983) writings on stories as communication.

Narrative Theory

Fisher's Narrative Theory presupposes that "humans are essentially storytellers" (1987, p. 64). Though his definition of narration encompasses far more than just family stories, the characteristics he defines of narration, for the most part, hold true for family stories as well as other narration.

When looking at family narratives that are intended to teach, persuade or socialize, Fisher's Narrative Theory is especially pertinent. He posits that two criteria are used in determining the quality of a narrative, and thus its ability to persuade or teach. First, it must be cohesive — realistic, meaningful and free of inconsistencies. Second, a narrative must have fidelity, that is, it must seem truthful or reliable. A narration that meets these criteria is considered rational.

Fisher states that narration can be divided into two types: "recounting" or "accounting for." "Recounting" narratives include history, biography and autobiography, while "accounting for" narratives include theoretical explanation and argument. Though

no research has previously done so, family stories, when examined by their functions, can be categorized into "recounting" or "accounting for" groups. For example, a story with the function of passing on information from one generation to another (i.e., a grandmother telling her grandson about her father fighting in World War I) would fall in Fisher's "recounting" category. A story with the function of persuasion (i.e., a mother telling her son how her sister was almost killed when she didn't wear her seat belt) would fall into the "accounting for" category of narratives.

Stories of Experience

Kamler (1983), like Fisher, defines narratives or stories in much broader terms than simply family stories. Kamler states that each person has his or her own personal psychological contexts or "stories of experience." These stories are "invisible" (we don't always realize that others don't share our stories), they can isolate us, they sometimes agree and they can change. Kamler posits that all communication is

> a sharing of stories. Most stories seem to cry out to be shared. And getting shared is perhaps the most profound function of stories. Stories are the stuff of communication. And the sharing of them is what transforms persons into communal beings. In trading our stories back and forth for inspection, agreement, disagreement, we are involved in the activity of making ourselves members of a community. (p. 49)

Fisher's Narrative Theory and Kamler's writings focus more on the content of the stories than the act of telling of the stories. These theoretical approaches support a study

examining the functions of family stories.

According to Vangelisti (1993), there has been a recent increase of attention given to family communication by many politicians, social workers, counselors and researchers, with the crux of this attention being focused on how family members communicate with each other and society. Though research on family stories has increased in recent years, the literature still is lacking in studies comparing family stories told in different ethnic groups. Additionally, several studies have examined the functions of family stories; however, none compare the functions of family stories in different ethnic groups. The importance of this research lies in filling the gap of previous research, in gaining an understanding of family members' experiences with family stories and how those experiences vary among ethnically diverse families.

Chapter Three: Statement of Purpose

The study of family stories is still a relatively new area of research and one that needs more attention for several reasons. First, recent findings demonstrate that family stories may be predictors and indicators of marital, familial and parent-child relationship satisfaction (Oppenheim et al., 1996; Sherman, 1990; Veroff et al., 1993; Vangelisti & Crumley, 1997). Understanding family stories can lead to a better understanding of these relationships. Second, scholars agree that family stories are a powerful socialization tool (Blum-Kulka, 1993: Miller et al., 1990; Stone, 1988). Parents can use family stories to their advantage to teach family values to their children. Third, the telling of family stories may lead to better fathering, if used in the right environment (Dollahite et al., 1996).

However, family story research is not conclusive in many areas. Studies have agreed about some aspects of family stories (e.g., mothers and females being the primary tellers of family stories; men being portrayed in work situations and women being portrayed in family situations) and disagreed about other aspects (e.g., if men are over-represented as subjects in family stories). Some areas of family stories have been studied frequently (e.g., themes and intergenerational stories), while other areas have received scant attention (e.g., cultural differences in family stories).

Though the functions of family stories have been studied, research has been limited and the topic deserves more study. In addition, very few studies have investigated the differences among ethnically diverse families in regards to family stories. The following questions were addressed in this study:

RQ1: What differences exist among Caucasian, African-American and Hispanic families' perceptions of the functions of family stories?

RQ2: Whom do Caucasian, African-American and Hispanic families perceive to be the most frequent tellers and subjects of family stories? Are there any differences among the different ethnic groups?

Chapter Four: Methods

Participants

Three families in Omaha, Nebraska participated in this study. The participants were recruited from people I know. The Alexander family is Caucasian with two parents and five children ranging between the ages of 15 and 22, three of whom currently live at home. The Robinson family is African-American with two daughters in their 30s living at home, and an uncle, who is very close to the family, who lives in California. The Martinez family is Hispanic, with two parents and eight children between the ages of 15 and 30, three of whom currently live at home. I chose these families because they frequently tell family stories, they are of similar class status, and they are of different ethnic groups.

Procedures

Past research that has used observation as the method of studying family stories has primarily been interested in *how* the stories are told. Because I was instead interested in family members' perceptions, I used the semi-structured interview to ask about functions and other aspects of family stories. Rubin and Rubin (1985) define semistructured interviewing as occurring when "the interviewer introduces the topic, then guides the discussion by asking specific questions" (p. 5). Millar, Crute and Hargie (1992) do not explicitly define semistructured interviews; however, they do define *highly structured* and *highly unstructured* interviews. From these definitions, one can infer that their definition of a semistructured interview would include the following characteristics:

moderate topic control, moderately fixed wording, and both open and closed questions (p. 111).

The semistructured interview is used often because of its strengths, three of which will be discussed here. Rubin and Rubin (1985) state that the semistructured interview format is helpful for an interviewer trying to get detail, example, and context. Some structure is necessary to direct the interview; however, flexibility is also necessary to make adjustments where necessary so the purpose of the interview can be accomplished. A second strength, according to Maso and Wester (1996), is that the semistructured interview seems less imposing to the subject of the interview and allows for more natural type of information gathering. A third strength, according to Rubin and Rubin (1985) is that the semistructured interview allows the researcher to have some flexibility in asking the same questions to everyone. This enables the interviewer to achieve his or her goal of finding "out what happened and why, in rich and individualistic terms" (p. 11).

One limitation of the semistructured interview is that the interviewer using the semistructured format faces the inherent problem of detail gathering. The interviewer's goal may be to make the interview as natural as possible, but in a truly natural situation, he or she would have to "immerse him or herself in the informant's life world, in all its detail" (Maso & Wester, 1996, p. 100). The interviewer may then compromise by avoiding too many details. Because I was not looking for a great number of details in my interviews, I did not foresee this limitation as a problem in this research.

Each family member was interviewed separately and each interview lasted approximately 5 to 45 minutes (two of the brothers in the Hispanic family had very little to say, thus, the 5-minute interviews) A pre-designed interview protocol (see Appendix A) was used. In the first portion of the interview, I asked the family members to tell me family stories. Some probes were necessary, but the stories generally came easily and quickly. Although discovering the content of the stories was not a primary purpose of this research, I had two reasons for asking for family stories. First, I felt that I needed to have a basic understanding of what types of stories are told in these families to understand the stories' functions. Second, asking for stories seemed to be a good way to get the interviewees in a "family story mode," hopefully enriching my later questions about their perceptions of the functions of family stories. Some interviews were more loosely structured than others, depending on the family member's willingness to talk. I did not define "story" in the interviews, but simply asked the family members to tell me a story that is told in the family, leaving the definition up to them. However, deciding what should be considered a story for my own analysis was a more difficult task than I expected. My basic criteria were that there were enough details that I could repeat the story back to someone and that the "story" was or included an incident.

Data Collection

Individual interview sessions were conducted with each family member in their homes, except for two of the Alexanders, one of the Robinsons and one of the Martinez

family, who were all interviewed over the phone because they live out of state. I took detailed notes during all interviews and audio taped the in-person interviews.

Data Analysis

I reviewed audio tapes and my interview notes and developed field notes. The field notes included history about the family, family stories (often direct quotes), functions of stories, and answers to other questions. After reviewing the field notes, I developed functional categories that encompassed the perceived functions of family stories for each family. I then compared the families' perceptions of family story functions to look for differences in function among the different ethnic groups. I expected potential differences to be manifest in one of two ways — either in finding a family that did not perceive a certain function that other families perceived or in finding a family to state a perceived function, yet tell me no stories that would fall under that functional category.

I also used the answers to my interview questions and the family stories I was told to determine how the families differ in regards to family story tellers and subjects among ethnic groups. In a later analysis, I categorized the family stories by theme and looked for patterns and differences among the families.

Chapter Five: Results

This section will discuss each family and their experiences with family stories separately and then compare these families' experiences in context of the research questions. Before discussing the perceived functions, it is important to note that these functions are not mutually exclusive; that is, one story may serve more than one function. I have included here each function that was mentioned by family members to provide a clear view of their perceptions. I have also included several examples of family stories to illustrate these functions. However, because stories may serve more than one function, it sometimes becomes problematic to label a story as having a certain function, when it may have many.

The Alexander Family

The Alexanders' two-story home sits comfortably on a mid-sized lot in a suburban-like Omaha neighborhood. Peter, 22, greeted me at the door on a Sunday afternoon and led me through the house to the living room, past 15-year-old Patrick who was asleep on the family room couch. The living room was neat and comfortable, the couches were arranged in an "L"-shape, and the lights were dim, until Mary came in for her interview and turned on some additional lighting. I sat on the end of one couch, and as each of the five family members who live in the home came in, he or she chose to sit perpendicular to me on the other couch.

Steven and Mary are the parents of the Alexander clan. In their 40s, they have been married more than twenty years and are the parents of five children. They met on a

double-date while in college, although they were each with a different person. The family is very active in their church. Steven served as a lay minister for a congregation for several years, and Mary currently teaches religion classes to high school church members. Steven owns a computer business, and Mary is a professor, teaching family science and parenting classes at a local university. The two oldest children, Amy and Peter, are fraternal twins, age 22; Amy is 10 minutes older than Peter. "I loved being the oldest," Amy said; she especially enjoyed baby-sitting her siblings while growing up. A college graduate, Amy is newly married and living in New Hampshire with her husband. Although Amy usually got along better with people than Peter did, they have always been close, Peter told me. "It was neat to start kindergarten together, start driving and dating at the same time," he said. Peter is a student at a local university and is quite active in the church's young adult program.

Andrea, 21, is just 13 months younger than Amy and Peter. "When I was little, I thought I was a triplet," she admitted. She emphasized her closeness to Amy, saying they lived together during some of their college years. A senior at Brigham Young University, Andrea is planning for a medical career. (I interviewed both her and Amy by telephone.) Eric, 18, said that being one of the youngest, he hears "all the stories about how hard it was when they (Amy, Peter and Andrea) were young and the family was poorer. They (say), 'You get all these luxuries.'" However, he said, his parents claim they don't treat the younger kids any differently than the older ones were treated. Eric is a senior in high school and on the football team. Patrick, 15 years old, and a sophomore in high school,

recognized that, as the youngest, he spends more time at home with just his parents than his siblings did. The Alexander family resemblance is apparent, especially between Andrea and her mother, who look very similar, and have nearly identical voices.

Stories

The Alexanders are definitely a story telling family. Members of the family told me that family stories are told "daily," "all the time" and that the frequency of the stories was "not quantifiable." It is evident that family stories are integral to the Alexanders' daily lives. Mary said, "I think in stories. (Even during) "hugely irritating (situations) my mind is going . . . I'm thinking, 'How will I write this to my sister?'" And, according to Steven, "Any event that happens in our life, whether it's good or bad, virtuous or villainous, it reminds us of another person" and a story.

There are several specific times when family stories are told, according to various Alexanders. These include when the whole family is together, when the family goes out to eat, at the dinner table, on birthdays, and when looking at family photos.

Some of the Alexanders' stories were told to me by more than one person and some stories were told differently depending on who told them. However, as with all the families, I was more concerned about the family members' perceptions of the functions of family stories rather than how many each person told and how they remembered and understood family stories differently.

The family members told me that Steven and Peter are the most frequent subjects of stories and that Mary tells the most stories. Though I am not positing that this was

necessarily a valid sample of family stories, it is interesting that the Alexander family members' perceptions about who tells the most stories and who is the subject most frequently was mirrored by this sample of stories.

Feelings About Family Stories

Overall, the family members have a positive affect for family stories. The Alexander children were raised with hearing family stories. Andrea said that as young children they used to ask their parents, "Tell a story about when I was little." Amy described her feelings about family stories as "good, comfortable" and said she "rarely" feels uncomfortable during family stories. Andrea focused on the humor of telling family stories, saying that everyone is usually laughing and that she enjoys telling family stories more than doing any other activity with her family because it's the one thing that everyone enjoys. Andrea also said that on her birthday, she used to love listening to her parents tell the story about the day she was born. Peter's feelings about family stories are more pensive, including feeling "interested" and "inspired."

Being the subject of a story may result in different feelings about family stories. Steven did not convey any negative feelings about stories about him, stating that those stories are usually a good-natured jab. Mary, though, said that Steven doesn't like embarrassing stories told about him in his presence because he doesn't like people looking at him. Steven said that his children are not always happy about the family stories that they're the subject of since they're not always put in the best light. However, the children's responses didn't entirely reflect their father's perception, as most of them are

not generally bothered by stories told about them. Perhaps the difference between Steven and the children's perceptions is due to the children's maturing. From my interviews, it seems that when the children were younger, they were more easily embarrassed than they are now, and Steven's perception may come from his memories of their embarrassment when they were younger.

In addition, the maturing seems to lead to more interest in family stories. Steven noted that, regarding some family stories, "My children aren't all that interested until a particular time." Andrea said that she and Amy have become more interested lately in stories about their parents and grandparents and have taken an active, questioning role. The premise that the children get more interested in certain family stories as they mature may also explain why Eric and Patrick said they didn't know the story about how their parents met — they may just not be interested enough yet.

Intergenerational Influence

The influence of the extended family has an effect on the Alexanders' perceived functions of family stories. Mary comes from a family who told a lot of family stories. Mary said that her family would tell family stories primarily to entertain, but that Steven's family would use stories to make fun of other family members and try to embarrass them. When they married, Mary said, Steven had a rough adjustment from his family's norms of family stories to Mary's family's ability to tell funny stories without people feeling embarrassed or having their feelings hurt. However, she said, "he's come around" while they've been married. Four of the Alexander children mentioned that whenever the aunts

and uncles (Mary's siblings) get together, they tell family stories. In fact, Andrea told me she spent Thanksgiving with some of her aunts, uncles and cousins and "all we did for two hours was sit around and tell stories."

Mary said that this tendency to tell stories is "a family trait." Indeed, if there were a gene for telling family stories, I would certainly conclude that it has been passed on from Mary's siblings to their children. Amy and Andrea both mentioned that as the cousins have gotten older, they have begun to spend time telling stories and reminiscing about times they've had together, as well as joining in with the adults. As children, they found this boring, but it has grown more interesting as they have grown older (similar to the earlier discussion about interest in family stories being peaked as children mature). Amy remarked that as they've grown older, the cousins have talked more about times they've spent together, even joining the adults at times. Now, "it's more of one big story telling" session, Amy said.

Amy expressed that when her mother and siblings get together sometimes, it seems to be competition to be the funniest. This can cause Amy to feel uncomfortable, specifically when they tell some stories about their mother, who died of cancer about 12 years ago. She was very sick before she died and did some "crazy" things. Although Amy said she realizes that her mother and her siblings had a strained relationship with their mother during those last few years, and may find telling funny stories as a way to deal with that, she wishes they would tell more good stories about her grandmother.

Certainly, stories about the extended family also play a role in the Alexanders'

telling of family stories. Patrick mentioned that his mom tells stories about her brothers and sisters to him and his siblings. In fact, two of the stories told to me were about extended family members. The extended family also hears stories about the Alexanders. Two of Mary's younger sisters lived with Mary and Steven for short periods of time, and consequently the extended family knows a lot of funny stories about Steven. "Everyone on my mom's side of the family thinks he's so hilarious," said Andrea.

Steven's parents died when he was young, following which he lived with his aunt and uncle. Because of this, Steven said, he was the instigator in finding out about the family stories about his parents, going to his grandmother, aunt and uncle for information. When his children express interest in learning about their paternal grandparents, Steven has shared that information with them.

Functions of Family Stories

In this section, I will discuss the gist of this research — the functions of family stories in the Alexander family. One question in the interview was, "Why do you think your family tells stories?" The answers to this question resulted in seven functions of family stories for the Alexanders: (1) reminiscing; (2) illustrating individual traits; (3) entertainment; (4) teaching; (5) passing down family history; (6) inspirational; and (7) relating/empathizing.

Reminiscing. The very nature of a family story, telling about a past event, seems to assume some sort of reminiscing. In fact, one might say that all stories are reminiscent in nature. I suggest it as its own function here for two reasons. First, two of the family

members said specifically that they use family stories to reminisce. That the family members see it as a function was important as I am concerned with their perceptions. Second, the word reminisce has a positive connotation; that is, when people "reminisce," it is most often about "the good ol' days," rather than bad memories of the past. A review of the stories told to me revealed that although some of the stories could be considered "negative" (such as Eric and Patrick wrecking the car), when these stories were told to me, they were told in a very positive manner, leading me to believe that these times *are* considered the "good ol' days" to the Alexanders. The difference between these and other stories may lie in the primary function of the story. A story told by a parent to a child to teach her something may relate to a positive memory, but its primary function would be to teach, not reminisce. Perhaps then, reminiscing is a function of all stories to some degree, but particular stories are told *primarily* to reminisce.

As the parents, Steven and Mary are able to reminisce more about their children's lives and their own lives. One example of such reminiscing would be when the parents talk about a child's birth. Andrea told me the story about her birth, stating that this is a story her father has often told on her birthday — that there weren't enough bassinets in the hospital and she had to sleep in a box.

During the interviews, Steven did not volunteer any stories about himself growing up, but Mary did tell me a story about her and a friend as young children climbing up a church steeple and getting in trouble. Mary's tendency to tell stories about herself may be, in part, for her to reminisce, according to Steven. According to Andrea, Mary tells a lot

more about her own childhood than Steven does. "I don't know very many stories about my dad growing up," Andrea said.

Illustrating individual traits. Mary suggested that another function of family stories in the Alexander family, especially when she and Steven tell them, is illustrating a family member's personality trait. Through the family story, the storyteller is explaining another family member's personality. There are many family stories about Peter that demonstrate this function. Steven said that he and Mary are "forever telling stories about Peter" who was "kind of rebellious in his earlier years" and had an "I've got to find out for myself" attitude. Steven explained that as a baby, Peter never accepted what another person said. "If he was told something was hot, he would immediately grasp it. I remember coming home . . . and seeing the burn circles on Peter's hands from where he grabbed the stove burners." The story Mary used to illustrate Peter's strong will was that as a child, he would not wear a coat. By the time he finally would wear his coat in January, he wouldn't take it off until July! Mary also told me a story about Peter that illustrates a different aspect of his personality. The story begins, she said, "with Steven asking me if I used his razor. I was slightly offended, as it was wedged full of hair." She continued that Peter had first shaved off his sideburns, then he shaved his eyebrows. Mary uses this story to explain how Peter would worry about the less obvious things in life. He was a "kid who wouldn't carry a sack lunch to school because he was afraid people would laugh at him," she explained, yet he shaved off his eyebrows.

Andrea told me two stories her parents tell about her to illustrate her personality as

a young child. She was very jealous of her mom's friends' babies because she was worried that her mom would get another baby and she, the youngest at that time, would lose some of the attention she was receiving. Another story is that Andrea was so shy as a three-year old that her dad had to go sit with her every Sunday in Sunday school for an entire year. Amy said that Steven likes to tell the story about when she didn't make the cheerleading squad. He uses this to illustrate Amy's ability to handle disappointment. "His point was always a positive thing and how much he admired his daughter," she said.

This illustrative function of family stories can also be seen when a child tells a story about a parent. For example, Eric told me a story about Steven on a Boy Scout canoeing trip. Steven wanted some water to drink, so he went out in the canoe to the middle of the lake, taking with him a camera that belonged to another scout leader. In trying to get the drinking water, Steven fell into the lake. Eric, who was watching the scene, said that immediately his father's hand shot out of the water holding the camera. "People think he's stern," said Eric. "I tell that story to people who know him so they can see another side of him."

Entertainment. One of the most frequently mentioned functions of family stories was entertainment, teasing, fun or light-heartedness. In fact, Amy said that when they are telling family stories "there are *some* serious moments, but not very often in comparison" (to the humorous ones). Many of the family stories told to me during the interviews would fall in the entertainment functional category.

Mary's profession and church teaching give her many opportunities to tell stories

about Steven and others often simply for humor. According to Steven, "I have people from across the state of Nebraska . . . meet me (and) say, 'Oh, so *you're* Steven.' I never know what that means." Eric expressed similar feelings, stating that, "Other people come up to me and say, 'I heard that you . . .'."

Steven is often the subject of entertaining family stories because of some of the funny things that he's done and said. For example, Patrick told me that once Steven was on the phone with an employee of a sprinkling company and ended the call by saying, "Adios muchachos." Patrick said that he, Peter and Eric like to tell that story and give their father a hard time about it. Apparently, one of the favorite entertaining stories about Steven happened a few years ago. The family was on vacation, traveling to Yellowstone, when their van broke down somewhere in Montana. Steven walked to a dealership and found someone to help. He drove up with this mechanic in an old, beat-up pick up truck. The mechanic's clothes were dirty and his appearance seemed rather rough. After they got the van started, Steven gave the mechanic some money and said, "Thank you, sir. You're a gentleman and a scholar." Amy explained that the remark was so out-of-context that the family thought it was hilarious. Although told to me by Amy, Steven referred to it in his interview as well. This story is told often by family members, especially the sons, and the story is frequently simply referred to just by someone saying the phrase, "a gentleman and a scholar."

Eric told me that when he was a kid, he was obsessed with shoes. "I wouldn't take them off. I would point to other people's shoes and say, 'shoes.' When I finally

decided to take my shoes off, it was on a family vacation." Because of his not taking his shoes off for so long, he said, his feet really stunk. Another story that would be considered to have an entertainment function, told by Amy and Mary, is that when Amy was three years old, her father was about to receive an important position at church. When one of the church leaders stopped to talk to Amy, she pulled up her dress and said, "Look, I don't have any panties on!"

Teaching. Steven mentioned that Alexander family stories often have a moral. Mary defined the stories with a moral as "Thus, we see..." stories. Eric also named "making a point" as one of the functions of family stories, and Patrick mentioned that his father often tells "short stories that teach a lesson — like wear a hat in the winter." Mary also uses family stories to teach her students about various aspects of family development.

A few of the family stories that would be considered as teaching stories are as follows:

Peter told me a story of one of his ancestors, a 12-year old young man who left Scandinavia as a captain's servant. After arriving in America, the captain wouldn't let him go and so he escaped by swimming. Peter said that his mother tells this story, and that he learned from it that "it's important to look at where we came from" and to have the "guts to stand up for what is right."

Another example of a "teaching" family story is the story about Eric and Patrick wrecking the car — especially that Eric had to pay back "every cent" of the $1500 cost to

fix the car by working at Goodrich Dairy. According to Eric, "Mom tells it to make a point."

Eric also said that he has heard the story about when his father first started his company and worked long, long hours. The moral of this story, according to Eric, is to "work hard, even though it's tough."

Passing down family history. Another way family stories may function, mentioned by the Alexanders, is to pass down family history. The story of how Steven and Mary met seems to function in that way, helping the children to understand how the family started. Steven said that they also tell other stories about where they used to live, why they lived there, and so forth. Although one could argue that any story is about the past and would function then as a family history function, some stories seem to function better in this capacity — the stories of when the children were born, the story of Steven working hard to start his business and stories about what happened on vacations. The story Peter told of his ancestor would certainly also perform this function.

Inspirational. Peter specifically mentioned that family stories are also used to inspire and uplift. Though no specific examples of a story fitting this function were given, it seems to be a function that ties in closely with the previous two — teaching and passing down family history. The story Peter told about his ancestor, clearly chronicling family history, could also be used to teach and give inspirational messages.

Relating/Empathizing. Family stories are also used by Steven and Mary to try to relate to and empathize with what their children are going through. This type of story

differs from reminiscing and entertainment stories because the storyteller (a parent in this case) has the intention of trying to build a closer relationship with a child or help the child to feel better. Andrea identified empathizing as one of the functions of family stories. Andrea said that she's noticed her mother tells her different stories now than she did when Andrea was younger, concluding that is because her mother is trying to relate to her. Steven also acknowledged that Mary tells those types of stories, stating specifically that one of the functions of those stories is "to compare what she went through growing up with her kids." Similarly, Patrick finds that his father tells him a lot of stories about "what he thought at my age" and the styles at that time.

The Robinson Family

The Robinsons live in an older area of Omaha, a neighborhood with large, old houses, tall trees and hilly roads. Their home sits atop a hill with a long staircase leading to the front door. A piano studio in the basement allows Claudette to teach music lessons.

The conflicting schedules of parents Claudette and Harold (married 42 years) and Julie and Claudia, their two adult daughters (who also live in the home) made it difficult to schedule interviews. "We're all running different directions all the time," Julie said. "We never see each other except maybe about 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. We'll even cook and just leave the food there and someone will grab it on their way to wherever they're going." I interviewed Harold, Claudette and Julie on a weekday morning in the large front room of their home. Although I briefly met Claudia, I was unable to interview her.

However, during the interviews, I learned that Claudette's brother John, who lives in California, tells many family stories and I later interviewed him via telephone.

Harold, who is seven years older than Claudette, was best friends with John (Claudette's brother) as children. "Our mothers were friends long before my birth," John told me. Harold said, "I was at his house all the time and we ran around together." As a "protective brother," John said he discouraged people from being around Claudette; no one was good enough for his sister, not even his best friend. Claudette recalled that she used to ask Harold, "'Don't you have a home?' I was the brat little sister of his best friend. He just annoyed me to no end. I think I had a crush on him then and just didn't know it." Harold agrees that his wife was mean to him, but "I didn't pay any mind to that." Julie was also quite familiar with the story of how her parents met. "My father was always over at my mom's house, hanging out, doing guy stuff, and my mother *hated* my father, is the way the story went. She used to pinch him, throw rocks and bricks at him."

Harold, a retired postal worker, missed some of his daughters' lives as they grew up, as he frequently worked nights. Claudette, a piano teacher and instructor at a local university, has passed on her love of music and showmanship to her daughters, who have both participated in theater.

Stories

The Robinsons have a positive affect for family storytelling. "They're always good feelings," Julie said. "We're always laughing." Claudette described the feelings as a contagious sort of comraderie. As with the Alexanders, the Robinsons' family stories are

certainly not limited to the nuclear family, evidenced by John being included in the interviews. When I asked the family members about family stories, there was no hesitation in including stories about cousins, ancestors and other relatives.

The Robinsons tell family stories when they have time together as a family, either on Sundays or holidays. Because of their conflicting schedules, storytelling does not seem to happen as much as the family would like. Julie told me that a huge storm about a year ago provided a great time for telling family stories. "The last time we actually had the chance to do that was in October when everybody lost the power for a week. We had to live in front of the fireplace . . . and so we sat around . . . wrapped in blankets and sweatshirts and . . . we started to really talk about how things have changed over the past thirty years and just a lot of old memories."

I was told that Claudette and John told the most stories. There was no clear agreement among family members about who was most often the subject of family stories, although the sample of stories I was told clearly had Julie as a/the subject the most often.

Functions

As with the other families, I was most interested in finding out what the Robinsons perceived to be the functions of family stories in their family. From their answers, I have defined the following functions: (1) reminiscing; (2) illustrating individual traits; (3) entertainment; (4) teaching; (5) dealing with a racist society; (6) therapeutic; (7) inspirational; and (8) passing down family history.

Reminiscing. Julie mentioned reminiscing specifically as a function of family stories. When I discussed reminiscing as a function of family stories with Harold, he told me that he and John like to laugh about the times they had together when they were young, such as the following story:

> We went to Kansas City once. There was four of us. We didn't have any money, no jobs. We stayed down there about two weeks. Two of us would sleep in the hotel . . . two would sleep in the car. We'd take turns. We stayed until we just couldn't stay no longer. My brother-in-law went and got himself a job with an insurance company and got one for me and I had no intention of staying. So, I told the insurance people that I'd be going home; I had to see about my family, and I'd be back. I had no intention of going back. So we had this car and we didn't have money to buy gas, oil or anything. So we left Kansas City and got to St. Joe and this car began to smoke a little bit . . . We crossed the South Omaha bridge, the car was smoking; it had burnt the motor up. He (John) stayed about a month after that and then his grandmother made him come home.

Julie also told a reminiscent story:

> Our whole family used to go out to California where my mom's older brother now lives. He lived upstairs from a mortuary. When I was seven or eight years old, it didn't bother me at all. We used to run downstairs playing tag through the embalming room and there would be dead people laying around and it didn't bother us; we didn't think anything about it.

Illustrating individual traits. Using family stories to illustrate a family member's personality appears to be another function of family stories in the Robinson family. Near the end of the interview, when I asked Claudia to tell me the functions of family stories in their family, she did not mention this as a function. However, she mentioned it twice in our interview regarding specific stories. One story is about the family taking a trip to Missouri to visit Harold's family. Claudia, a young child, was quite excited. As Claudette told it: "We pulled up in front of my husband's aunt's house. And we all got out of the car and Claudia looked around and said, 'This is not issouri. This is a house!'" After telling that story, Claudette said that "this story comes up when we talk about Claudia being different from the rest of the family." Claudette specifically pointed to this as an example of illustrating a family member's personality.

More examples of how this function is used came up when Claudette discussed Edward, Julie's fiancé. Claudette said that they love to tell Edward stories about Julie growing up. "We try to bring him up to date on all the stuff that she liked to do and how busy she kept us when we were bringing her up." When I asked why, she replied that it was "so that he gets more insight into what she's like, so he'll know how to deal with her. He'll be able to understand his spouse and when she does something, he'll know kind of how to react."

Entertainment. All four of the Robinsons agreed that entertainment was a function of their family stories also, although some used words such as "humor" or "laughing" to

describe it. These entertainment stories, when told to me, were accompanied by much laughter. One of these stories was told by Julie about her cousin:

> My uncle's oldest daughter Carol, she was a great befriender of hoodlums in her school, and my mother kept warning her that this one girl she was hanging around was trouble. And she wouldn't listen; she liked this girl, nobody else liked this girl, and she did and they went somewhere together and this girl, I believe she shoplifted, is the way the story goes. And the police picked them both up and took them down to the police station, and my cousin was just *horrified* because she had been warned and warned and warned and warned and warned that this girl was trouble. And she said her strongest memory was sitting in a police station and she could hear my mother's heels, her high heels, clicking down the hallway as she was coming down to pick her up from the police station. And she said that was the longest few seconds of her life, knowing that when my mom got in there she was going to be chewed out. And that's one of our favorite stories, but she still talks about that, listening to my mom's heels clicking on the linoleum, coming down in there.

Though Julie didn't specifically state that entertainment was a function of this story, her words that it is "one of our favorite stories" led me to categorize it as such.

Laughing at oneself also seems to be something the Robinsons like to do. Two stories show this. Julie told me a humorous story about herself. "As a baby, I found out what my own middle name was and I used to then want to know what everyone else's

middle name was." She said that she found out her father's middle name was Edward, and for some reason, thought that was extremely funny. The ironic part, she informed me, is that she is now engaged to marry an Edward.

Claudette told a humorous story about herself also. She was pregnant with Claudia and was asked to do the musical direction of a show. She said she asked them to find someone else, but they needed her. Even though she was very pregnant, she accepted. On opening night, she said:

> They brought the houselights down and they had the piano kind of at an angle from the wall and the houselights came down and . . . I made my entrance and I came in to sit at the piano and I couldn't get in there. My stomach was so big that I couldn't. So they had to bring the houselights back up, bring someone out to shove the piano out just a little bit, and then bring the houselights back down, and then I made my entrance and the audience was in stitches . . . Claudia was born just after we finished the run and then they asked to . . . hold it over again, so I came back much thinner.

Teaching. John emphasized family stories as having a teaching function, although he did not offer any specific examples of a family story he would consider to fit in that function. As with Mary Alexander, Claudette may use a family story to teach other people. The example of this is a story she and Julie both told me. As Claudette told it:

> When Julie was nine months old it was her first Christmas. I went out and the first thing I bought, naturally for her was a piano for her with a little bench and the

> whole thing. And my mother-in-law wondered if I had completely lost my mind. This child is nine months old. Why would you buy a piano? So, Christmas morning, Julie came down and she looked under the Christmas tree, went straight to the piano, sat down on the bench and played all day long.

Claudette said that she tells that story to mothers of young children to help them see that their kids aren't too young to learn music. "People think people are too young, but it is never too early to introduce them to music and to the love of music," she said.

Dealing with a racist society. Both Claudette and John emphasized how family stories can be used to help children deal with racial prejudice. As Claudette said:

> You can help the little ones learn to deal with it, because if you're a black young child, you're going to have to deal with it. Well, they start dealing with it right away, the minute they leave the home and go to school, and they run into other children of other ethnic backgrounds, you have to have them prepared. Family stories, they've heard them by the time they go to kindergarten, they've heard, "When you get there, someone may look at you funny, you know, because you look different, and . . . you have to deal with this."
>
> They have to build this defense and they have to do it early so that . . . every time they run into racial hatred, they can't just fold up. They've got to build inner strength to deal with it, and you have to start young to give them pride in their background, and you have to . . . make them understand that you aren't going

> to dislike these people for this . . . but don't let it affect you any more than you have to.
>
> Claudette told a story about Julie as a child that illustrates this function:
>
> When we first moved in here . . . there was a young white male there renting a room (from a neighbor) and he came over and he asked me would it be all right if he sunbathed in our backyard because they didn't have any yard over there. I said, "Oh, that's fine," and so he lay down in the backyard there and he was sunbathing. And Julie was just a little one and she asked me what was he doing. I said, "Oh, he's sunbathing. He's going to get his body all nice and healthy and brown like yours" . . . so she goes to kindergarten . . . the next day and she told them, all the class that . . . "You all need to go and lay out in the sun and get healthy like me because you all look sickly because you're all so white and pale."

Julie remembered this situation and told me that she just thought that all white people wanted to be black.

Therapeutic. Family stories serving a therapeutic function was specifically mentioned by Claudette and alluded to by Julie. This idea seems to stem specifically from some of the experiences that John's daughters had growing up. As Julie explained, "For some reason (their mother) didn't like them to stop by their father's grandmother's house. There was some kind of a rivalry going on there, and they would literally get in trouble if they stopped after school to see my grandmother and great-grandmother." Though I

wasn't told specifically of any other traumatic experiences these girls had growing up, I was certainly under the impression that they had some additional rough times.

Julie went on to explain that these girls, her cousins, enjoy talking about those times now. She said:

> Just the way they're looking back on it now as adults . . . it's shaped who they are and their decisions that they make today and whatever strengths or weaknesses they have come from those stories and those experiences. I never get a sense of any bitterness or resentment or anger about any of it. It's really interesting.

Claudette explained:

> They are ridding themselves of the pain. They had some pain with family conflict when they were young and now they can look back on those stories and they can understand what they were going through at the time, and I think they come to grips with what the parents and their grandparents were doing on the other side of the family. They understand it now that they're adults. And I think to tell those stories kind of gets the hurt out and smooths it over now that they can kind of realize what was going on. Now they laugh at it because they can see it through the eyes of an adult, and it's humorous to them now, but at the time it was quite painful. So I think it's kind of therapy, stories are serving as therapy.

Inspirational. Julie was the only one in her family who specifically stated that family stories could be used to inspire or uplift. The story she gave as an example of this

was about her great, great grandmother. She and her two daughters were sold together on a block into slavery. Julie said:

> They stayed there for a period of time . . . and she ran away and took her daughters with her. And, I guess, she hid, we have no idea how far from there, but they never found her for quite a period of time. By the time she emerged from wherever she was hiding and moved, we believe, to Arkansas, they had finally signed the Emancipation Proclamation so she did not have to go back if she was found.

This, Julie said, was "an uplifting story, somebody that succeeded when they got away."

Passing Down Family History. Julie was also the only one who mentioned passing down family history as a function. The story about her great-great grandmother she also labeled as having a family history function. That story showed how their family is matriarchal. Julie said, "We have a very matriarchal family. The women basically have to hold the family together. I think that's probably . . . the structure of black families even today. Back then, your husband, your kids, anybody could be sold off."

Julie said that stories with a family history function are not told as often as stories with other functions in her family. "Usually they come about when we are showing pictures," she said. John suggested that at times it may be necessary to edit family history stories, however. His example was that if the family history contained a story about an ancestor being lynched, he wouldn't pass that story on.

The Martinez Family

The Martinez home sits on a corner of an older residential neighborhood of Omaha. I first visited the home on a warm spring day. I made my way through a cluttered front porch to be greeted by Octavio, 15, the youngest of the family's eight children, who was eating a fast food lunch with his nephew and his friend. The clean, orderly inside of the house provided quite a contrast to the front porch. Pictures of children and grandchildren hung on the white walls and a vase of roses adorned the kitchen table. I sat on a couch in the living room to await my interview with Engracia, the mother, who was running a little late. The second time I visited, a Sunday evening later in the summer, the house was much busier, as various family members came to eat dinner, participate in the interviews and other activities. Engracia was busy in the kitchen most of the time I was there, preparing and cleaning up dinner. Arcadio (the father) was outside working on a car most of my second visit, although he did come in at the end of my visit so I could interview him. "I love all my kids. I'm proud of each one," Arcadio told me.

Three of the eight Martinez children still live at home. Of these eight, I was able to interview seven. I was told that one son, Arturo, travels a great deal for his job and is nearly impossible to contact. The children range from ages 15-30. Rafael, the oldest, lives in Lincoln, Nebraska with his wife and daughter where he attends the University of Nebraska. I interviewed him the second time I visited the home, when he and his family had come for a visit. Arcadio (named after his father) is also known as Lalo (I will refer to him as Lalo). He is the second oldest child and lives in Indianapolis with his wife and

three children, where he works for IBP. I interviewed him via telephone. Cesar, the third child, is married and has a baby girl who was born within the several weeks that I was trying to set up interviews. He works full-time as a computer programmer for Oriental Trading Company and is finishing his degree at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. I interviewed him at a local restaurant over lunch. The next two children, Arturo and Laticia are 25-year-old twins. Laticia and her husband live in South Omaha with their two children, one of whom was also born during the weeks I was interviewing. I interviewed Laticia in her home. Alicia, 23, works full-time and lives at home along with her sister Liliana, 20. I interviewed both of them the second time I visited. Laticia, whom I interviewed before her two younger sisters, told me of the contrast between Alicia and Liliana. Of Alicia, she said "She's very quiet, very peaceful." This was contrasted with Laticia's words on Liliana: "She's really crazy!" I certainly found Liliana to be the most animated and outgoing in the interviews, and her hearty laugh punctuated the stories she told. She apparently has quite a reserve of stories because of the things that happen to her. "It's just amazing the things that happen to me. Usually if something is bad is about to happen to someone, it's going to happen to me. If somebody is going to trip over a cord, it's going to be me." Octavio, the youngest, has been teased that he should have been a girl, so that the gender pattern in the family would have been four boys, four girls. His name, literally meaning "eighth," was chosen by Rafael, Laticia said.

The children all speak English very well, and I had no trouble understanding them. Arcadio and Engracia, however, have a more broken English, and our communication was

somewhat hindered by that at times.

Arcadio and Engracia have been married for 31 years; they met in Juarez, Mexico. Arcadio had been working in the United States at that time, but would come home for visits with his father, who lived in the same apartment building as Engracia's family. Engracia told me, "I asked for help to him about my sister. She was sick and I need help and I asked to him for help to go to the hospital with my sister. And he do it. It was very good because he's very intelligent. I was maybe 16 years and he was 28." Alicia said, "My grandma would always tell my mom that she would marry him or something, that he was so handsome. She was like, no way. I guess she didn't think my dad was handsome. It was just funny how she ended out marrying him." Engracia told me that her parents did not communicate well with her, nor teach her important things about being married. "I think, if I was married, I could go to the movies and dancing. Not the responsibilities."

In 1979, the family moved to Chihuahua, Mexico where Arcadio owned and operated a store. In 1984, he sold the store, due to poor economic conditions, and began working in the United States, though his family stayed in Mexico. A niece, who lived in Omaha, suggested he come to Omaha to find work, and about ten years ago he moved to Omaha. He subsequently moved his family to Omaha, except Lalo, who stayed in Mexico for several years before moving to the United States. Engracia spoke of the transition to the United States being a very difficult one for her and how she wished they had never moved here. Now, she says, she is happy here and things have worked out well.

An initial concern with using the Martinez family was that a possible class discrepancy would exist among the socioeconomic classes of the three families in my subject pool. Two primary differences, as related to class, are seen with the Martinez family. First, the Martinez family is not as well-off financially as the Robinsons or the Alexanders. In addition, Arcadio has a blue-collar job (working as a "lot man" at a used car lot), unlike the parents of the other two families, who have white-collar jobs.

Despite these differences, I chose to include the Martinez family for the following reasons. First, when they lived in Mexico, Arcadio owned and operated a store, certainly a white-collar profession. The language barrier he has in the United States keeps him in a maintenance job, according to Heather (Cesar's wife). Second, the family puts a high priority on education. Most of the children have had some education beyond high school and are finding white-collar careers. Engracia also has gone to classes to learn English better and told me that "I take time for study." Third, though not as well off financially as the other families, the Martinez family is far from being poverty-stricken. I would put them in the same middle-class category as the Robinsons and Alexanders, though they would fall lower in that class than the others.

Stories

Telling stories is a way of life for the Martinez family. "We just love to tell stories," Cesar said. "I think for us it's like telling stories is part of our culture, it's part of our society. We like to tell stories; we like to remember the good times. We love life, so telling stories is part of our life." Family members told me repeatedly that stories are told

"whenever we get together." Liliana said family stories are told even when just she, her mom and Alicia are together.

The feelings about family stories are very positive. Family members used words such as "good," "unity," "closeness," "laugh," and denied ever feeling embarrassed about any stories that are told. Alicia added that even when it's a sad story, they find some humor in it.

Cesar and Engracia were cited the most often as being the ones to tell the most stories, perhaps a function of how much they talk. Lalo said, "He (Cesar) loves talking; he won't stop." "He is just the person who can talk and talk for hours," said Alicia. "She (mom) is very talkative; she knows us all," Liliana said. I did not get a clear understanding of who the Martinez family members perceive to be the most frequent subject of stories, however.

Very little was mentioned about the extended family when family members talked about stories, although a few stories told to me had to do with family members outside the immediate family. In addition, Liliana mentioned that family stories were a way to learn about the extended family.

Functions

Six functions of family stories emerged as important to the Martinez family: (1) teaching: (2) learning about each other; (3) reminiscing; (4) inspirational; (5) entertainment; and (6) revealing God's protective hand.

Teaching. Engracia emphasized her use of family stories to teach her children. "I don't want them to experience these problems," she said, referring to the problems that resulted in her parents not teaching her practical things about life. Rafael and Octavio both also mentioned their mother using stories to teach. Arcadio said that he also uses family stories to help his children "learn and understand." However, though this is clearly a function of family stories in the Martinez family, I was only told one story that fits this function, that of Engracia getting married so young. She has told her children that story to teach them not to get married that early.

Alicia suggested that her mom tells a lot of stories about when she was younger and how her parents treated her poorly to teach the kids to appreciate what they have. Similarly, Laticia said that she thinks her mom tells those types of stories so they don't take what they have for granted.

Learning about each other. Five of the children stated a function of family stories was to get to know about each other better or share experiences. Laticia said she sees family stories as a way to find out "what we were thinking when we were doing it (and) why we did it." Octavio, the youngest, said, "I wasn't there for half of the stuff they did," also stating that family stories are a way for him to get to know more about his siblings. Again, no particular story was cited specifically as fulfilling this function, but it is evident that this is a perception shared by many in the family.

Reminiscing. Family stories are also used as a way to reminisce and remember the good times the family has had, according to three family members. Lalo told me the

following story as one that he likes to remember. He and Cesar (at ages 7 and 5) liked to go look for candy. Their mom was pretty strict, allowing them to have candy only at certain times. "I pushed Cesar up . . . to get the candy jar, but it broke." In the process, the whole shelf came down, including the china. Although they tried to clean it up, in the end a lot had to be thrown away. "Most of the stories we usually share . . . are bad things that we did as kids," Lalo acknowledged.

Inspirational. Stories may also serve an inspirational function in the Martinez family, according to Cesar and Alicia. Cesar said that a lot of stories they hear are about hardships and how to overcome them. "It's a way to give you hope. To say, 'If they can do it, I can do it, too.'" he said. These stories help "you focus on success." Again, no stories were given as examples for this function.

Entertainment. As with the other families, family members described a function of stories as being fun or a reason to laugh. I have collapsed these into the entertainment function. An example of a story told for fun is one Laticia said Arturo likes to tell about how she would get into fights in first grade. A little boy used to call her and her friends names, so she fought him. Laticia said another story that is laughed about now is about Lalo. "Lalo, he was always out with girls. He was always dating. He'd give my mom's stuff away (to impress the girls.) He was a Romeo. "He gave away my mom's . . . mixer. (She was) making a cake." Although Lalo got in trouble, their mom laughs about that now, Laticia said.

Alicia told the following story about Cesar that she said is told for fun:

> My brother Cesar he talks when he sleeps. And then we had a bunk bed; he would sleep on the top one. He was sleeping one night and then he woke up and then he started saying something about (the game leap frog). He was thinking about that, I guess. He was dreaming about it. And then he was on top of the bed . . . and then he jumped and then he fell on the floor. And it's always so funny how we remember.

Liliana also told a story about Cesar that she said is told because it is funny. As children, they were taught not to talk back to their elders; to be respectful, especially to their parents and grandparents. When Cesar was about four, "he asked my grandpa to hold on to a cord . . . and he told him not to let go of it. Meanwhile he was like rolling it. And then my grandpa started doing something and he let go. And Cesar was like, 'Oh Grandpa, didn't I tell you not to let go!'" She said that her grandpa had to walk out of the room because he was laughing.

A final example of a story that fits under the entertainment function is one that Liliana told me about herself:

> When I first started college . . . the first days, I would always go out, always. And this was during Halloween season. And Sunday night, even though I wasn't supposed to, I went out to a haunted house, and it was like super late, it must have been like 11 or so. And afterwards we went out to eat, we went to Village Inn, and there were like these little (lollipops) and I happened to take a blue one. And I

> ate it that night. And I got home like around 3 or 4 in the morning . . . And I think that the door was locked because they always lock the doors and I didn't have a key or anything. So I had to sleep in the car and the next morning I had to go to college . . . And I didn't even look in the mirror; I just got in the car. I didn't brush my teeth, I didn't wash my face, nothing. I just left . . . and I get to the class . . (A class mate said) "Oh, Liliana what's this in your hair?" and all of a sudden he pulls like this really long string (cobweb from the haunted house). And I started laughing, and it turns out, I had eaten that (blue lollipop). My teeth were all blue! . . .And if that wasn't enough . . . and all of a sudden this little insect from outside starts crawling out of my bag!

When I interviewed Liliana, other family members were in the dining room (adjacent to where we were). She told this story in a very animated way, laughing at herself during much of it and others joined in the laughter. Although I preferred to interview family members separately, out of ear shot from each other, this particular instance provided me a glimpse into what it would be like to hear Martinez family members telling each other stories.

Revealing God's protective hand. This function was mentioned only by Cesar. He explained it as stories telling "how God preserves you . . . even though you may do dumb things or crazy things . . . somehow he . . . always protects you or helps you on many occasions." Cesar emphasized this as a function as associated with two specific stories, as follows:

> My father used to work at a store in the United States. And he used to collect the cardboard boxes and he used to break them and bring them to the house and he used to store them (in a big storage shed). We used to play around there and stuff. We used to make houses (out of the cardboard). And we said, "Oh yeah, we're going to put a chimney on this" and all this stuff. So we're like playing with matches that we got somehow somewhere. So we were done playing and we thought like we put the fire out, and we left, but we must have left some little particles that were lit up. So we went inside the house and watched TV. And a neighbor kid (ran up to the door). "Your house is on fire! Your house is on fire!" They came with hoses trying to help put the fire out.

The second story was about him and Lalo:

> One time me and him were younger and my dad used to have a truck on the farm in Texas, and the truck had an extinguisher. We were outside in the truck playing around and we were just really playful. And he had an extinguisher and my brother goes, "Oh I wonder what this is?"

Cesar said they set it off and it went all over. Luckily, a lady was passing by and opened the door so they could get out.

Cesar sees both of these stories as functioning as a way to show how God helped them. "Some of those we could have probably died . . . God had somebody there to open the door for us (in the truck with the fire extinguisher) . . . We could have been burned to death (with the house fire)."

Similarities and Differences

My interviews with the Alexander, Robinson and Martinez families provided a total of eleven different perceived functions of family stories. These are shown in Table 1, with notations of which families perceived which functions. [1]

One research question posed was: What differences exist among Caucasian, African-American and Hispanic families' perceptions of the functions of family stories?

First, in looking at similarities of perceived functions, it is evident that these three families have quite a lot in common in how they perceive family stories to function. Members of all three families saw reminiscing, inspirational, entertainment and teaching as functions of family stories. Within these functions, the only obvious difference lies in the teaching function. Both Mary Alexander and Claudette Robinson use stories about their families to teach people *outside* their families, something that I didn't see in the Martinez family.

Two functions were mentioned by members of the Alexander and Robinson families, but not by the Martinez family: Illustrating individual traits and passing down family history. (The Martinez family did tell me a family historical story, but it was never mentioned as a function.) Each family also had one or two functions that were unique to them. The Alexanders were the only ones who mentioned relating/empathizing as a

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[1]Some family members' answers led me originally to have an additional functional category of family bonding; however, I have chosen to designate that as an *outcome* of telling family stories rather than a function or reason why the stories are told.

Table 1

Functions of Family Stories by Family

Function	Alexander	Robinson	Martinez
Reminiscing	x	x	x
Inspirational	x	x	x
Entertainment	x	x	x
Teaching	x	x	x
Passing down family history	x	x	
Illustrating individual traits	x	x	
Relating/Empathizing	x		
Dealing with a racist society		x	
Therapeutic		x	
Learning about each other			x
Revealing God's protective hand			x

function, the Robinsons were the only family that saw a therapeutic function and a function of dealing with a racist society, and the Martinez family was the only one that suggested learning about each other and revealing God's protective hand as functions.

My second research question was concerned with roles in family stories: Who do Caucasian, African-American and Hispanic families perceive to be the most frequent tellers and subjects of family stories? Are there any differences among the different ethnic groups?

At least some members of each family named the mother as one who tells the most stories, although some of the Robinsons said John does and some of the Martinez family said Cesar does. Finding out whom the families perceived to be the most frequent subject proved to be more difficult. The only clear answer I got was in the Alexander family, where Steven and Peter were perceived to be the most frequent subjects.

In addition, I found some other differences that are noteworthy. I did not define "family" in the interview, though I had my own conception of what I considered to be a family member, as discussed in the Literature Review. In Claudette Robinson's interview, she told me of a family friend, Marcy, who loves to tell about Claudette teaching her piano lessons. When she plays the piano today Marcy says that "she can still feel the reverberations of the beat as I would pound on the bench. She still can feel the beat vibrating through her whole body when she's playing. That just amuses her to no end." Claudette considers some of these piano students, whom she taught from early childhood, as part of the family. Although I would not consider this a family story, by definition,

Claudette perceived it as such. Julie also sees these people as family. "We have a huge extended family because she teaches piano, and a lot of people, strangely enough, even if they didn't stay with piano, they kind of see my mom as like a surrogate mother because she was also like a therapist as well as a pianist. (Some of these) literally lived in this house . . . and they really love telling embarrassing stories," she said.

A second difference I found also related to definition, this time of the word "story." Again, this is not something I defined for the family members. John and Claudette Robinson seemed to interpret this word differently than I and others I interviewed did, however. When I interviewed John, I would use the word "story," and he would counter back that he was telling me a "truth" or a "true story." Apparently, he connotes the word story with a lie or untruth. Claudette's definition of story seemed to be quite broad. For example, she was telling me how family and friends had gathered earlier that spring and she referred to conversation and jokes that took place as "stories."

The other obvious difference I saw in discussing family stories among these families was that of the involvement of extended family in the family story telling experience. The Alexanders and Robinsons often included the extended family when talking about family stories; however, the Martinez family did not.

Chapter Six: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the differences in the family story experiences among families of different ethnic backgrounds. Though these findings can not necessarily be generalized to other families of these ethnic backgrounds, they do provide useful information.

Differences in Family Story Functions

In discussing functions, it is important to remember that stories can, and probably most often do, have more than one function. The eleven functions (Figure 1) defined from this study expand on previous research on functions of family stories (Byers, 1997; Stone, 1988). Some similarities existed between what I found and the functions that had previously been delineated. Functions found in this research that were not discussed in previous research on the functions of family stories included: inspirational, illustrating individual traits, dealing with a racist society, and learning about each other.

The families' positive feelings about family stories undoubtedly have an effect on their perceptions of the functions of family stories. It seems logical to assume that families with positive feelings about family stories will generally perceive positive functions (i.e., entertainment, reminiscing) while a family with negative feelings about family stories will generally perceive negative functions (i.e. belittlement, embarrassment).

The primary findings of this study were the differences in perceived functions among the families. However, whether these differences are attributable to the different ethnicities is unclear. The function of dealing with a racist society, seen only in the

Robinson family, seems clearly to be attributable to ethnicity. As discussed earlier, Stone's work (1988) addresses this issue, finding that African-Americans were more likely to see a world that was "less giving, even dangerous, and where individual initiative could be, and was, undermined by chance, oppressive authority, and even the weather" (p. 11). This is certainly a more negative view than the Robinsons have, but their ethnicity is obviously central to this perceived function.

The Martinez family, however, did not relate dealing with a racist society as a perceived function. Many plausible explanations for this exist. First, perhaps Hispanic families do not experience the racism that African-Americans do, and therefore do not see it as such an obstacle. The immigration factor could also explain this difference. Since the family lived in Mexico for many years, stories on how to deal with racism may not have been pertinent there. Perhaps after the family moved to the United States, their family culture and storytelling were already established enough that these stories did not emerge. Another possibility is that the family did not tell me this is a function because they did not realize it or because they did not feel comfortable talking to me, a stranger to most of them, about it. Another explanation would be that this is a "taboo" topic in their family (Book, 1996). I feel it is safe to say that although the Robinsons' inclusion of this as a function is attributable to their ethnicity, the Martinez family's exclusion of this function could be attributable to many different factors.

The Martinez family also did not include passing down family history as a function, though they did tell me a family history story. This exclusion of a function surprises me; I

would think that they, as immigrants, would use family stories to remember where they came from. Similarly, the Martinez family did not mention their extended family often, when discussing stories, as compared to the other two families. Though this difference can not be directly ascribed to ethnicity, I would posit that there is an indirect relationship here, in that they immigrated to the United States, leaving nearly all of the extended family in Mexico. Perhaps then it is a proximal issue; since they do not see the extended family as much as the Alexanders and Robinsons do, those types of stories and experiences with extended family are not as common.

Other differences in perceived functions may be attributable to factors other than ethnicity. For example, the Robinsons' inclusion of a therapeutic function[2] seems to be related to family experiences that could happen in any ethnic group. The function mentioned by some of the Martinez family of learning about each other also does not appear to relate to ethnicity. Instead, it is apparently attributable to family size. That is, with a large family, where the children are relatively spread out, they missed out on a lot of each other's lives and now use the family story to learn more about each other. Perhaps this isn't a function for the other two families as the Robinsons have only two children and the Alexander family children only have a seven-year range as compared to the Martinez family's 15-year range.

The function of revealing God's hand protective hand is not clearly attributable

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[2]Although this function is not one that has been included in previous lists of functions, it is a function that has been examined (Williams, 1995).

either. I would not posit it is ascribable to ethnicity or religion (as the Martinez and Alexander families are the same religion). Perhaps, as it was mentioned only by Cesar, it is more of an individual difference than difference among the families.

Using family stories to illustrate a family member's traits or personality is a function that the Martinez family excluded and relating/empathizing is one that only the Alexanders mentioned; however, I see no relation between these functions and ethnicity.

The findings relating to family story roles are also interesting in terms of ethnic differences. The inclusion of the mother as a primary story teller in all three families supports previous research that mothers contribute the greatest number of stories (Loeb, 1996; Stone, 1988). This was the most obvious in the Alexander family as nearly everyone agreed Mary told stories the most often. The Martinez family was not quite as united in their opinion on who tells the most stories; some said Cesar and some said Engracia. Whether Cesar's propensity to tell stories is attributable to ethnicity is difficult to ascertain. In the Robinson family, both John and Claudette were said to tell the most stories. From my interviews, I gathered that Claudette would be most likely to tell stories about the immediate family and John about the extended family. When compared with other research, the finding that an adult male would tell a lot of family stories may be surprising, especially coming from, what Julie called, a strong matriarchal family. John explained that his role in telling family stories has to do with how he was raised. "I was embedded in the women in the family," he said. Raised by his mother and grandmother,

he learned many of the stories from his grandmother. So, perhaps the nature of this strong matriarchal family actually contributed to John's role in the family of storyteller.

Framing the family story in a theoretical perspective discussed earlier may be helpful in understanding these functions. Fisher (1987) stated that narration can be divided into two types: "recounting" or "accounting for." "Recounting" narrative includes history, biography and autobiography, while "accounting for" narrative includes theoretical explanation and argument.

I suggest that seven of the functions found in this study would fit in the "recounting" category, being those types of stories that are primarily a report of what has happened in the past. However, I do see four functional types of stories here fitting in the "accounting" category: illustrating individual traits, teaching, dealing with a racist society and revealing God's protective hand. Stories that primarily have these purposes seem to fit well with Fisher's explanation of "accounting for" narrative. For example, in a story functioning as illustrating individual traits, the storyteller is explaining another family member's personality through narrative. Or, in a story with a teaching function, the storyteller is, in a sense, making an argument for why a person should do something. Because stories do at times fit into more than one function, though, this is not a perfect analogy.

Family Differences and Ethnicity

I began this study with an expectation that I would find differences in family story functions among these families. Differences were found, although attribution to ethnicity

may be questionable in some cases. What I didn't foresee, however, was where these findings would lead — to a more underlying question of how these families are different. On the surface, the answer is simple: they have different skin color, different family sizes and different backgrounds. Beneath the surface, however, there is much more. In this section, I would like to take a more global perspective to look at these families and their experiences. To do this, I have at times stepped away from the functional analysis to look instead for differences among the themes of the families' stories.

Though both families are ethnic minorities, the difference between the Robinson and Martinez families' experiences *as* ethnic minorities is profound. This was not obvious to me at the beginning of the study, as I was more motivated by finding families of different ethnicities who frequently told family stories. I did not fully contemplate the potential differences between an ethnic family with roots in the United States and an immigrant family.

As immigrants, the Martinez family has experienced the United States much differently than Mexican-American immigrants of the early 1900s who were treated with much the same discrimination as African-Americans (Henderson & Olasiji, 1995). The Martinez family came here to find a better life; and they seem to have found that as they have assimilated into American society. The children are, for the most part, successful in their school and occupations. Two of the sons have married American women, which is a sign of assimilation (Yinger, 1985). Though not rich, the parents can provide for themselves and their dependent children. However, this is not to say the way has been

easy. Engracia and Arturo Martinez both told me of the hardships they have faced to get where they are today — economic problems, language barriers and internal family conflict. But at this point in time, life seems good and there is a feeling of optimism in the family.

The Robinsons have not had to assimilate to a new country. Their roots are here, but they are painful roots, roots of slavery, shame, prejudice and discrimination. These issues were very apparent in my interviews with the family, revealed in both function and content. These are issues that are being dealt with in both generations of the family, issues that will not soon fade from importance.

Two conclusions can be drawn here. First, these families, though both ethnic minorities, have had very different experiences. Second, family story themes in both ethnic minority families indicated working through problems and stories of hardship as a part, though not all, of the family story experience. The nature of those hardships vary, but their inclusion in family stories does not.

Contrasted with the Robinson and Martinez families, we see the Alexanders. As members of the ethnic majority in this country, their social position is different, and this is manifest in their story functions and themes. Stories seem to be more celebratory, without an evident theme of hardship and trial. Family stories seem, for a large part, to be about children doing cute things when they were younger, stories about parents doing funny things, and stories about good times the family has had together. I am not discounting their experience with family stories, as these stories have several functions and are

important to this family. However, their family story telling experience, as a whole, seems to be missing the stories of working through issues that the other two families have.

Another interesting finding is a phenomenon that occurred only in the Martinez family. As I analyzed stories by themes, I noticed that the children in the Martinez family primarily told me stories of silly things they did as children and stories of them getting into trouble. The stories the parents told me, however, were of a more serious nature — the hardships they have endured in their lives. This generation gap, of sorts, was not nearly as distinct in the other two families. Perhaps this gap can be explained by the immigrant experience, where the first generation is still very cognizant of the trials and sacrifices made in immigrating, and the second generation, who has assimilated well into the society, has not internalized stories of those themes to the same degree as their parents.

These issues of ethnic differences lead to even a more basic question that, though unanswerable in its fullest sense, deserves consideration: What does it mean to be an ethnic minority in this country? Certainly, that experience is dependent on many factors including class status, level of discrimination faced, immigration status and degree of assimilation. As I tried to understand these families' experiences through their stories, I came to a deeper realization that I can never truly understand the minority experience. As a white female, raised in a middle-class family, and having lived in the United States my whole life, how can I possibly understand the racial prejudice the Robinsons have experienced or moving to a foreign land as the Martinez family did? I relate to the Alexander family; my position in this society has been and is a comfortable one. My

family tells stories similar in function and theme to the Alexander family. We do not use stories to work through deep issues, but in more of a celebration of life and family. However, although I have not had the same experiences, I have attempted to portray what I have observed and learned about all of the families' experiences.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

Limitations and Future Research

Methodologically, this study had a few limitations. The language barrier between myself and Arcadio and Engracia Martinez, though not severe, may have left me with a less clear understanding of their perceptions than had we spoken the same language fluently. Interviewing some subjects over the telephone was also a limitation to this research. I felt I was better able to establish an immediate relationship with the subjects by using nonverbal communication in a face-to-face interview rather than in a telephone interview. The day of the week I met with the families may also have affected my results. For example, I met with the Alexander family on a Sunday afternoon when the family members seemed to be quite relaxed. However, I met with the Robinsons on a weekday morning when they had other pressing commitments. This difference may have affected my perceptions of the families as well as their ability to focus on the interviews.

Although several differences in functions were found, one obvious limitation of this study is the inability to ascribe differences found to causes. Differing definitions of the words "family" and "story" may have hindered my research with the Robinsons slightly, although I do not feel it had a large effect. Additionally, I could have done some things differently in the interviews, specifically having family members tell me stories that illustrated a particular function more frequently.

These results cannot be generalized to other families of similar ethnicities because of the study's small sample size. Although using an interview approach was effective for

gathering the necessary information, other research approaches could be used. For example, a participant-observation technique would allow for a study of family stories within the context of family interactions, letting the researcher watch the family as they co-construct family stories. Or, the researcher could interview individual family members first to gather stories and then facilitate a focus group with the family to ascertain differences within the family about particular stories and feelings about family stories in general. Another option would be to ask family members to show family photos and tell the stories that go along with those photos. Future research might use one or more of these methods to study family stories. In addition, enlarging sample size to include several families of each ethnicity may provide a better picture of ethnic differences. Using more of a cultural analysis could provide another way to analyze family stories.

A significant assumption in family story research is that families *do* tell family stories. In this research, of course, it was imperative that I chose storytelling families. However, in discussing this research with others, I became aware that not all families tell family stories. As such, future research could look more closely at families that do not tell family stories and at the differences between families that tell family stories and families that do not.

Future studies on both the functions of family stories and the differences in family stories among different ethnic groups could add important information to our understanding of family communication. Some areas of study that could be pursued are: (1) How African-American families use the family story to teach about dealing with a

racist society; (2) How families that have immigrated to the United States use family stories to teach family history; (3) What taboo topics (Book, 1996) exist in different ethnic families' stories?

Much opportunity exists for future research about family stories in general. For example, one might look at the role of family size in family storytelling, the role self-disclosure plays in family storytelling, and how family stories are used in persuasion. Another area of study might investigate source-oriented or receiver-oriented stories — for example, reminiscing stories may primarily serve the interest of the storyteller, who enjoys remembering old times, while teaching stories may primarily serve the interest of the story receiver, who can learn an important lesson from the story.

Vangelisti (1993) has suggested that the socialization of a new spouse into his or her spouse's extended family ought to be studied. I would add to that a specific focus on how family stories effect that socialization process. Further research is also needed in the intergenerational area of family stories. Do children who grow up with family stories have a higher tendency to tell stories to their own children?

There is some evidence that family stories, as a ritual, result in more positive family communication. Baxter and Clark (1996) studied the relationship between family rituals and the perceptions of family communication patterns. The researchers found that a family's commitment to ritualizing (i.e., how much they embrace and encourage rituals) related positively to supportive family communication. This area of study could be studied more specifically to examine a relationship between family story telling and family

communication patterns. Clearly, this is an area with much opportunity for future research.

Final Thoughts

The purpose of this research was to begin to fill a gap in previous research by gaining an understanding of family stories among families of different ethnicities. As the researcher, I have had two perspectives, as explained by Laing (Littlejohn, 1991). First, I had a direct perspective, as I listened to and observed these families tell me about their family stories. I also have had a metaperspective as I have made inferences, assumptions, and drawn conclusions about their family's experiences. The strength of this study lies in its previously untouched topic. As an exploratory study, however, conclusions are difficult to draw, but I have attempted to do so.

It is evident that family stories are integral to these families' lives and cultures. The families' stories have many functions, with several similarities across ethnic boundaries. Although I did find some differences among the ethnically different families, only one was clearly attributable to ethnicity. Other differences were possibly due to family size, experiences and other factors. The findings of differences are not generalizable; however, they certainly provide some groundwork for future research in this area.

In summary, family stories' themes and functions seem to be determined, in great part, by the family's experiences. Who the family is not only shapes the storytelling experience but is evidenced by the family story themes and functions. Family storytelling is an active process of not only reliving the past, but creating a reality for the family.

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Appendix A

Protocol for Interviews About Family Stories

Appendix A: Protocol for Interviews About Family Stories

The purpose of this interview is to find out about story telling in families. All the members of your family are going to be asked similar questions. There are no right or wrong answers — I am just interested in learning about family stories in your family from your perception as the/a/ (mother, father, sister, brother). As we go through the interview, feel free to ask me any questions you may have about anything I'm asking you. If there are any questions you don't want to answer, you may decline. With your permission, I am going to tape-record our interview so that I'm sure to get all of it. (Granted/Denied). What questions do you have before we begin?

Warmup:

1. So you are the oldest, youngest, middle, twin, etc. in the family. What's it like for you?

OR

How did you and your husband/wife meet?

5 stories:

1. Tell me a story that's often told in your family.
2. What's your favorite story?
3. Tell me a story someone in the family tells about you?
4. How did your parents meet?
5. Are there any more stories that come to mind?

    Each story:
    -Who tells it?
    -When is it told?
    -What does it mean to you?
    -Why is the story told?

Thanks for sharing those stories with me. Now I'd like to ask you some more questions about story telling in your family:

1. Who tells the most stories in your family? Why?
2. Who is the subject the most often? Why?
3. How often are the stories told?